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ABSTRACT

Mastery of literacy skills may be a preventive and proactive way to address the problem of the high cost of imprisonment and the huge increase in the prison population. However, correctional educators contend with multiple problems in delivering literacy programs to inmates. Findings of the National Adult Literacy Survey indicate that, of the 5 levels measured, 7 in 10 inmates performed on the 2 lowest levels. Only 51 percent of prisoners completed high school compared to 76 percent of the general population. Some constraints on correctional education are as follows: overcrowding; prisoners' negative early schooling experiences, lack of self-confidence, or poor attitudes about education; uniqueness of prison culture; and more seriously, conflicting beliefs about the goals and purposes of corrections; and use of recidivism as an outcome measure. Successful prison literacy programs are learner centered and participatory; they put literacy into meaningful contexts; and motivate and sustain learner interest by providing engaging topics. Literacy programs should be tailored to the prison culture. Incentives are important motivators. Lack of funding and staff can be offset by using community and peer tutors. Model literacy programs include postrelease services. A range of evaluation criteria offers multiple ways to assess program effectiveness: instructional, behavioral, and postrelease. (Contains 15 references.) (YLB)

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Prison Literacy Programs

by Sandra Kerka

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"It costs the government half a million bucks to keep me in jail and $450 to teach me to read and write" (ex-con cited in Porporino and Robinson 1992, p. 92). The literacy demands of the workplace and society in general are growing in complexity, and recurring linked cycles of poverty and low literacy levels put some people at increasing disadvantage. The prison population includes disproportionate numbers of the poor; those released from prisons are often unable to find employment, partly due to a lack of job and/or literacy skills, and are often reincarcerated (Paul 1991). Add to that the high cost of imprisonment and the huge increase in the prison population and it seems clear that mastery of literacy skills may be a preventive and proactive way to address the problem. However, correctional educators contend with multiple problems in delivering literacy programs to inmates. This ***Digest*** sets the context of prison literacy programs, outlines some of the constraints, and describes what factors work.

Context of Prison Literacy

Literacy skills are important in prisons in several ways: inmates often must fill out forms to make requests, letters are a vital link with the outside world, some prison jobs require literacy skills, and reading is one way to pass time behind bars (Paul 1991). The way literacy is defined is critical to achieving an accurate picture of prisoners' skills. The National Adult Literacy Survey (NALS) defines literacy as a broad range of skills; it is not a simple condition one either has or does not have, but a continuum on which individuals have varying degrees of skill in interpreting prose, documents, and numbers.

The NALS (Haigler et al. 1994) included interviews with some 1,100 inmates from federal and state prisons in order to depict the state of the prison population and compare it to the general population. Of the 5 levels measured, 7 in 10 inmates performed on the lowest 2 levels, on the average substantially lower than the general population. Only 51% of prisoners completed high school compared to 76% of the general population. Differences in literacy proficiencies were related to racial/ethnic status, educational attainment, and disability. Similarly, Newman et al. (1993) suggest that, by a 12th-grade standard, 75% of inmates are illiterate and that prisoners have a higher proportion of learning disabilities than the general population (including 75-90% of juvenile offenders). Other studies found that 65-70% of inmates (Sperazi 1990) and over 70% of inmates (Sacramento County 1994) did not complete high school. Even those with a high school diploma have lower proficiencies (Haigler et al. 1994).

However, some evidence exists to mitigate this bleak picture. In some areas, Haigler et al. found that prisoners with less than a high school education were more proficient than their out-of-prison counterparts. In Australia, Black et al. (1990) interviewed 200 inmates, finding they generally did less well on the prose, document, and quantitative scales, but on some literacy items did as well or better than the nonprison population. They concluded that it is difficult to make comparisons with the general population because prisoners are on average younger and disproportionately represent certain groups. They suggest that, because low literate prisoners often must seek help with literacy tasks from authorities and are subject to various assessments, their literacy problems are more visible than those of the general population. Acknowledging that low literacy in prisons is a serious problem, Black et al. advocate looking at literacy as a range or continuum and in context.

Constraints on Correctional Education

Between 1980 and 1992, the prison population increased 160% (Jenkins 1994). Besides the problems caused by overcrowding, correctional educators must contend with inadequate funding, equipment, and materials (Paul 1991). Many prisoners are likely to have had negative early schooling experiences and may lack self-confidence or have poor attitudes about education (ibid.). The prison educator's challenge is compounded by the uniqueness of prison culture: routines such as lock-downs and head counts, inmates' hearings or meetings with lawyers, all disrupt regular classes (Shethar 1993). Tutors and students are sometimes locked in a room and monitored by guards. Peer pressure may discourage attendance or achievement (Haigler et al. 1994). In addition, the prison environment is not likely to be rich in verbal and sensory stimuli (Paul 1991).

A more serious constraint is conflicting beliefs about the goals and purposes of corrections: security, control, punishment, or rehabilitation? Even in institutions where the philosophy is more rehabilitative than punitive, education is secondary to security (Shethar 1993). Part of this debate is the issue of whether prison literacy should be mandatory or voluntary. The federal prison system began mandatory literacy in 1982, and in 1991 raised the achievement standard from 8th to 12th grade (Jenkins 1994). The program has had some success in terms of adult basic education (ABE) completion, but only a small part of the prison population is in federal institutions (5%); 65% are in state and 25% in county/local jails (Laubach Literacy Action 1994). Mandatory education is resented by some (Thomas 1992) and it sits uneasily with the largely voluntary nature of adult education (Jenkins 1994). However, Thomas found that the least educated prisoners favored mandatory programs, and Ryan and McCabe (1993) conclude that there is little significant difference in achievement between mandatory and voluntary instruction.

Another problem faced by prison educators is the use of recidivism as an outcome measure. Sometimes ABE does have a demonstrable effect on reducing the rate of reimprisonment (Porporino and Robinson 1992). But Sacramento County's (1994) literacy program caused no significant reduction despite academic gains. Problems with recidivism as an evaluation measure include the following: (1) a universal definition is lacking; (2) it is indirect—it measures law enforcement activity, not education; and (3) it is too simplistic (ibid.), similar to using retention as the primary yardstick of ABE success. The effects of literacy programs are influenced by factors beyond educators' control: "One can argue that literacy programs do not change an economic system that requires unemployment and a working class and that the ability to read does not change a social structure that reinforces inequalities" (Shethar 1993, p. 368).

What Works

Examples in the literature demonstrate that programs based on current thinking about literacy and sound adult education practices can be effective. Successful prison literacy programs are **learner centered**, recognizing different learning styles, cultural backgrounds, and multiple literacies (Newman et al. 1993). They are **participatory**; instead of taking a "deficit" perspective, educators recognize and use learner strengths to help them shape their own learning. For example, Boudin (1993) drew upon women inmates' oral tradition by having them write and perform a play. Literacy should be put into **meaningful contexts** that address learner needs. Boudin used concerns about AIDS in prison as the organizing issue for instruction. **Engaging topics** motivate and sustain learner interest; using literature written by prisoners provides relevant subject matter as well as writing models (Paul 1991). Family literacy programs enable inmates to view themselves and be seen in roles other than that of prisoners.

Literacy programs should be **tailored to the prison culture.** The Principles of the Alphabet (PALS) computer-assisted instruction program worked in a prison for several reasons: it was advertised as a "reading lab"; learners were paired according to race, ethnicity, or the prison "pecking order"; PALS relieves tedium and teaches a skill that satisfies short-term self-interest; and computer disks afforded inmates a rare opportunity for privacy (Sperazi 1990). Honeycutt's (1995) interviews with reading program learners showed that adult education practices may need to be modified: inmates preferred teachers to facilitate *after* they taught skills; they liked less formal classroom arrangements, but wanted well-organized and structured instruction.

Incentives are important motivators, whether programs are mandatory or voluntary: sentence reductions, parole consideration, preferential prison employment, pay for school attendance, and grants for higher education are typical rewards for participation and achievement (Jenkins 1994; Thomas 1992). Lack of funding and staff can be offset by using **community and peer tutors.** Community tutors provide links to the outside world and can help ease the transition back to society (Paul 1991). Peer tutors can build their own self-esteem, serve as role models, and relate directly to learners' experience of incarceration (Boudin 1993). Model literacy programs include **postrelease services** that support the view of literacy as a continuum and reinforce skills that can quickly be lost. **A range of evaluation criteria** (Newman et al. 1993) offers multiple ways to assess program effectiveness: (1) instructional (attendance, test scores, duration, objectives achieved); (2) behavioral (decreased violence and disruption, better relations with inmates, staff); and (3) postrelease (employment rates and success, continuing education). Other measures include community service, length of time arrest/drug free, or improved social skills. The Correctional Education Association (1994) provides a handbook of literacy assessment and instructional techniques that work best in a correctional setting.

Perhaps the best program outcomes are those most difficult to measure. Instead of viewing literacy as the inculcation of basic skills, embedding it in a broader perspective of education might address the hopelessness and powerlessness that may be both the cause and effect of inmates' actions before, during, and after incarceration.

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